

**In the Name of Failure:  
A Generational Revolution in Indigenous Affairs**  
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**Introduction**

In April 2004, towards the end of its third term, the Howard Government announced its intention to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the statutory centerpiece of Commonwealth Indigenous affairs administration over the previous fifteen years. In so doing Prime Minister Howard and his Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, referred to ATSIC as an 'experiment in separate....elected representation, for Indigenous people' which had been a 'failure' and which would not be replaced. Instead a group of 'distinguished Indigenous people' would be appointed to 'advise' the government and ATSIC's former programs would be 'mainstreamed' to line government departments, though there would still be 'a major policy role' for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs (Howard and Vanstone 2004).

In this essay, I will focus on the way in which the idea of past policy failure has become the driving motif of Australian Indigenous affairs during the fourth Howard Government and how, in the name of failure, the Government has argued repeatedly for significant organizational and policy change. The first section of the essay documents, in chronological style, this constant linking of the idea of failure with arguments for change. The second section asks, in a more analytic style, what sort of change is now occurring in Australian Indigenous affairs? I argue that the change is best thought of as a generational revolution, which combines a major disowning of the work of the previous generation in Indigenous affairs with a significant ideological swing to the right. I suggest that this generational revolution has taken some seven or eight years to build and can be related to two major dimensions of Australian Indigenous affairs policy; its highly morally-charged nature and its highly cross-cultural nature. I also suggest that a similar generational revolution, drawing on the same moral and cross-cultural dynamics but moving in the opposite ideological direction, occurred in Australian Indigenous affairs between 1967 and 1976. This identification of two generational revolutions in Australian Indigenous affairs in the last forty years could perhaps encourage governments of all ideological persuasions to be a little more cautious about abandoning established approaches in

Indigenous affairs, in the name of failure, and striking out so self-assuredly on supposedly new, more enlightened, more informed paths.

### **Failure and change**

In February 2005, in an address to the National Press Club as the continuing Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs in the new, fourth Howard Government, Senator Amanda Vanstone identified as a 'brutal reality' that:

for all the dollars spent – over decades – and for all the goodwill, we are a long way from seeing all first Australians enjoy the opportunities the rest of us take for granted (Vanstone 2005a: 1).

This condemnation of an inadequate past was returned to several times as Minister Vanstone went on 'happily' to outline a 'quiet revolution' that was 'already underway' in Indigenous affairs, even though the legislation to abolish ATSIC was still, at that time, yet to finally pass the Senate.<sup>1</sup> The Minister identified two 'key aspects to this change', both of which, in pointing the way forward, also condemned the past. The first was 'genuinely giving Indigenous Australians a voice', which she argued ATSIC had not. The second was 'realising that the way we work, the way we organise ourselves as governments, has been a large part of the problem' (Vanstone 2005a: 1-2). Expanding on this last, Vanstone outlined the recent establishment of a network of regional Indigenous Coordination Centres, through which Indigenous communities could 'deal with the Australian Government as a whole', and an Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination within her department in Canberra (Vanstone 2005a: 6-7). She also pointed to a Secretaries Group which was meeting monthly in Canberra, through which 'some of our best public servants' were 'turning their minds to the issue'. There was also a parallel Ministerial Taskforce meeting regularly, both with the Secretaries Group and with the foreshadowed Indigenous advisory body, the National Indigenous Council (NIC). All this, Minister Vanstone said, was 'unprecedented', required 'dramatic change' and was thus 'a quiet revolution' (Vanstone 2005a: 7-8).<sup>2</sup>

By the end of 2005, in a speech entitled 'Beyond Conspicuous Compassion', Minister Vanstone was adding a cutting moral dimension to her arguments about past failure and emerging change. She defined conspicuous compassion as 'a culture of ostentatious caring which is about feeling good, not doing good' and argued that, for those who were

‘comfortable indulging’ in it, the new ‘environment will be challenging’ (Vanstone 2005b: 1). This moral condemnation of established interests in Indigenous affairs who might resist the failure and change analysis was, I think, an interesting addition to ministerial rhetoric and be returned to later.

In early 2006, a major reorganization of ministerial responsibilities saw Indigenous affairs relocated alongside families and community services under a new cabinet minister, Mal Brough. The new Minister’s policy focus and rhetoric, perhaps unsurprisingly, began to reflect this new grouping of portfolio responsibilities. In his first major speech in late April 2006, to a conference called the Social Innovations Dialogue, Minister Brough focused on the family as ‘the most important element of our society’, the ‘fundamental building block’ through which children are instilled with ‘values and principles’ and prepared for the ‘challenges of the future’ (Brough 2006a: 1). Most Australian families, he argued, are ‘strong’, and, with government assistance, this leads to strong communities. However a ‘small percentage’ of Australian children, he argued, do not:

receive the necessary support, nutrition, education and life skills from their parents or carers despite the provision of considerable financial and practical support from the Federal Government (Brough 2006a:1).

The Minister went on to describe ‘dysfunctional families’ in which alcohol, drug abuse and gambling are prevalent and the cash provided by the welfare system is used for these purposes, rather than in caring for the children. Minister Brough suggested that many in his audience would be ‘familiar’ with such ‘circumstances’ and would have ‘devoted much thought to how to address these challenges’. He then referred to two other public figures who shared this familiarity and concern: the chair of the NIC, Sue Gordon, and Cape York Aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson. Dysfunctional families were thus seen as a particular problem in Aboriginal communities, though Minister Brough insisted that this was ‘not a problem unique to Aboriginal communities’. The Minister noted that some voluntary family income management arrangements had helped overcome some of these problems, but that voluntary arrangements were not always taken up. He argued that it was:

time to take the tough decisions and move to a system that requires certain welfare recipients to have part of their payments directed specifically to the benefit of their children (Brough 2006a: 2).

Minister Brough believed that such families could be identified, that the technology was available and that it was 'reasonable' for 30 per cent of welfare payments to be directed in this way. He believed that the proposal 'would have a dramatic and positive impact on some indigenous communities' but that it could also have a 'positive impact... more widely'. He concluded in that April 2006 speech by noting that these thoughts were his 'own' and had been inspired by 'visiting distressed Aboriginal communities' but were 'not Government policy' (Brough 2006a: 3).

While the word failure was not directly used in this first major public speech, Minister Brough's sentiments about the past were clear and so too was his linking of these sentiments to an argument for future policy and organizational change. Three days before giving this speech Brough had announced that \$3m would be directed to the Cape York Institute, headed by Noel Pearson, to 'map out a new direction for Indigenous people receiving welfare' (Brough 2006b).

Less than a month later, on 15 May 2006, sexual abuse of Indigenous children erupted into national attention on the ABC's *Lateline* program through the revelations of a central Australian Crown Prosecutor, Nanette Rogers, of some horrific cases in which she had been professionally involved. Minister Brough's response was to label the current situation a 'disgrace' and to call for the State and Territory Governments to meet with the Commonwealth in a summit scheduled for June 26 to develop a 'National Plan for Action Against Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse' (Brough 2006c). On June 21, in the lead up to that summit, further allegations of sexual abuse of Indigenous children were aired on *Lateline* relating to the Northern Territory Aboriginal community of Mutitjulu, adjacent to Uluru. In light of this development, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Clare Martin, announced an inquiry into child abuse in all the Territory's Aboriginal communities, in addition to a taskforce which was then being set up between the Northern Territory's family and community service administration and police (Martin 2006). The inquiry was initially scheduled for six months, but in the event was not completed until April 2007.

Following this outbreak of public debate over sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, in some ways it became unnecessary for Minister Brough to repeat the idea of past failure in relation to child welfare. This was now widely accepted. All that remained, in this policy area at least, was to

develop ideas for change. However, in other policy areas the diagnosis of past failure was not yet quite so clear.

During August 2006 a raft of amendments was passed through the Commonwealth Parliament to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. Some of these amendments had been agreed to by the land councils, after protracted negotiations, and were uncontroversial. Others relating to township leasing were of more recent and contested origins, but were defended by Minister Brough as offering more ‘choice and opportunity’ to Aboriginal people than past land rights arrangements in relation to ‘home ownership and business development on Aboriginal land’ (Brough 2006d).<sup>3</sup> Then in September/October 2006, Minister Brough began an effort to reform the permit system that had operated on Aboriginal land under this Act. Under the heading ‘Permit System No Protection for the Vulnerable’, the Minister’s argument for change began from the idea that the permit system of the last ‘30 years’ had ‘contributed to dysfunction and exploitation’ and done ‘more harm than good’ (Brough 2006e).

In December 2006, in his second major policy speech, Minister Brough began with some brief comments which again suggested past failure. These can perhaps be selectively quoted as follows:

Australia... is a proud, strong and supportive nation.... But... Sadly, too many Indigenous Australians are not leading independent lives. They are not sharing the opportunities and choices. The standard of health and low life expectancy are unacceptable. Too many are trapped in an intergenerational cycle, a welfare trap that needs to be broken (Brough 2006f: 2).

The Minister went on to talk of ‘families’ in Indigenous communities he had visited ‘crying out for help’ and of the ‘sense of urgency’ that was behind his ‘promoting and introducing fundamental reforms’ (Brough 2006f: 3).

In March 2007, the failure and change analysis was directed more specifically at the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP), which the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services had inherited from ATSIC in 2004. A review of the program conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers stated its ‘overall conclusion’ as follows:

The housing needs of Indigenous Australians in remote areas have not been well served and the interests and expectations of taxpayers have not been met.

CHIP in its current form contributes to policy confusion, complex administration and poor outcomes and accountability of government funded housing, infrastructure and municipal services. The Community Housing and Infrastructure Program should be abolished (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2007:16).

Minister Brough's view, when he released the report, was as follows:

CHIP, previously managed by ATSIC, has clearly failed to deliver and needs urgent reform...

While billions of dollars have been invested in Indigenous housing, there is little to show for it.

We've been chasing our tail and not seeing any significant progress in overcoming the Indigenous housing problem in remote Australia particularly.

The review of CHIP...found current Indigenous housing arrangements flawed and unsustainable. It provides a sober analysis of the situation and radical way forward (Brough 2007a).

The report outlined a 'new strategic framework' which essentially involved combining Indigenous community housing with public housing, expanding public housing and providing assistance for home ownership, including in remote areas on community title land (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2007:23). The Minister's response was that these, 'along with other views', would be 'considered by the government in exploring future directions in Indigenous housing' (Brough 2007a). But as the Nicholson cartoon reminds us, Prime Minister Howard had already, two years earlier, clearly expressed his enthusiasm for increasing home ownership among Indigenous people as the preferred way forward (see also Sanders 2005).

Over the next couple of months, these future directions in Indigenous housing began to emerge through a number of funding packages specific to particular places which Brough began announcing. In the hope of encouraging home ownership, many of these packages tied housing funding commitments to land tenure change. This led to a degree of controversy and, in the case of the Alice Springs town camps, to rejection of a funding package (Brough 2007b, 2007c). Some packages, like the ones for the Tiwi Islands off Darwin and for Noel Pearson's home community of Hope Vale in Cape York, ranged into areas like education, sport and welfare reform, but all had housing and land issues at their core (Brough 2007d, 2007e).

In amongst all this activity on housing and land packages, on 30 April 2007, Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin announced that she had received an 'advanced copy' of the report of the Inquiry into the

Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse and that it would be made public 'as soon as it is printed' in 'about 4 weeks' (Martin 2007a). In the event it was June 15, over six weeks on, before Martin could announce that she had been given the 'final report' and would table it in the Legislative Assembly the next week. Martin foreshadowed a 'full response to the report in the August Sitzings of Parliament', but immediately committed her government to 'implementing the key action areas of this report' and 'tackling this deeply disturbing issue'. She listed nine specific areas of action, including three areas of legislative change (Martin 2007b, Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007).

It is not entirely clear to me from the public record, when in this period Minister Brough, Prime Minister Howard and other Commonwealth officials gained access to the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry. Minister Brough did, however, clearly announce on June 19 that he had received the welfare reform report from the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership which had been funded just over a year earlier. He noted his agreement with the Institute about the 'absolute priority' of the 'welfare of children' and of 'dealing with the causes of child neglect and abuse'. He also noted that the communities 'want changes' and thanked both the communities and the Institute for their involvement in a 'high quality report which is ambitious and wide ranging' (Brough 2007f, Cape York Institute For Policy & Leadership 2007). Noel Pearson and the Cape York Institute seemed to have done something in their inquiry process which, in Minister Brough's and Prime Minister Howard's judgment, Clare Martin and the Northern Territory Government had not. For, when the Commonwealth did respond to the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry, this response took a very different form.

On 21 June 2007, Prime Minister Howard and Minister Brough held a joint press conference which began as follows:

Well ladies and gentlemen, Mr Brough and I have called this news conference to announce a number of measures to deal with what we can only describe as a national emergency in relation to the abuse of children in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

Anybody who's read or examined the report prepared by Pat Anderson and Rex Wild entitled Little Children Are Sacred will be sickened and horrified by the level of abuse. They will be deeply disturbed at the widespread nature of that abuse and they will be looking for the responsible assumption of authority by a government to deal

with the problem. We are unhappy with the response of the Northern Territory Government (Howard 2007).

Howard detailed this unhappiness with the Northern Territory Government and then announced eleven specific intervention measures. These measures were repeated in summary form in a media release by Minister Brough, as follows:

- Introducing widespread alcohol restrictions on Northern Territory Aboriginal land.
- Introducing welfare reforms to stem the flow of cash going towards substance abuse and to ensure funds meant to be for children's welfare are used for that purpose.
- Enforcing school attendance by linking income support and family assistance payments to school attendance for all people living on Aboriginal land and providing meals for children at school at parents' cost.
- Introducing compulsory health checks for all Aboriginal children to identify and treat health problems and any effects of abuse.
- Acquiring townships prescribed by the Australian Government through five year leases including payment of just terms compensation.
- As part of the immediate emergency response, increasing policing levels in prescribed communities, including requesting secondments from other jurisdictions to supplement NT resources, funded by the Australian Government.
- Requiring intensified on ground clean up and repair of communities to make them safer and healthier by marshalling local workforces through work-for-the-dole.
- Improving housing and reforming community living arrangements in prescribed communities including the introduction of market based rents and normal tenancy arrangements.
- Banning the possession of X-rated pornography and introducing audits of all publicly funded computers to identify illegal material.
- Scrapping the permit system for common areas, road corridors and airstrips for prescribed communities on Aboriginal land, and;
- Improving governance by appointing managers of all government business in prescribed communities (Brough 2007g).

While the word failure was not to the fore in these announcements of intervention and significant institutional change, the sentiment of arguing for change on the basis of past failure clearly was. In an interview with Prime Minister Howard that night on *Lateline*, the word failure did indeed appear. In response to a question which asked whether this was 'one of the significant acts' of his 'time', the Prime Minister replied as follows:

Certainly in the social area, yes, because there has been a complete breakdown of these communities and this represents a cumulative failure of the policy approach over a long period of time.

We are certainly suspending certain approaches and certain practices in the name of saving the children, because the past approach has failed (Lateline 2007).



Six weeks later five Bills were passed through the Commonwealth Parliament to enact these changes. The first focused on welfare reform and essentially did three things. First, it introduced a general nationwide scheme making income support for children conditional on school attendance and providing for income management in cases of parental neglect. Second, it introduced a specific income management scheme for the prescribed areas in the Northern Territory, where all residents for the next twelve months would have half their income support payments managed. Third, it introduced a scheme for Cape York which recognized a new body established under Queensland state law which would have some power to direct management of a person's income support from Centrelink. The second and third Bills were directed specifically to the Northern Territory and overrode in quite specific detail certain aspects of the existing Commonwealth *Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978*, *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*. The fourth and fifth were appropriations Bills, which allocated an additional \$587m during financial year 2007-2008 to the 'Northern Territory National Emergency Response'. In introducing the Bills specific to the Northern Territory, Minister Brough began his second reading speech as follows:

When confronted with a failed society where basic standards of law and order and behaviour have broken down and where women and children are unsafe, how should we respond? Do we respond with more of what we have done in the past? Or do we radically change direction with an intervention strategy matched to the magnitude of the problem (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 7 August 2007: 7)

Here again we see a classic statement of the past failure and fundamental change argument which had become the driving motif of the fourth Howard Government in Indigenous affairs. Nicholson's view was that 'rough justice' was being replaced by 'Brough justice'.

### **A Generational Revolution**

In this second, more analytic section of the essay, I want to ask what sort of change we have been observing in Australian Indigenous affairs under the fourth Howard Government? I want to begin to answer that question by noting two aspects of the foregoing arguments about failure and change. The first is that the past being denigrated in these arguments is about thirty or forty years, or about the length of a working career spent in Indigenous affairs. The second is the highly moral tone of many of these arguments,

with words like compassion, disgrace, disturbing and shame often to the fore. What seems to be going on here, as much as an argument for change, is a moral denigration of the previous generation of people working in Indigenous affairs.

Building on these two observations, I want to suggest that Indigenous affairs is an, if not the moral *cause celebre* of Australian nationhood. It is one of the primary ways in which settler Australians, in particular, try to demonstrate their moral adequacy, or superiority, both to each other and to the world. I also want to suggest that this struggle for moral ascendancy has both temporal and ideological aspects. Succeeding generations of settler Australians characteristically believe themselves to be better at dealing with Indigenous issues than earlier generations and so too do competing ideological groupings within Australian society at any one time. This can lead to some interesting alliances and dynamics.

Noel Pearson has also recently noted this moral dimension of Indigenous affairs in his columns in the *Weekend Australian*. In late 2006 he noted the moral importance of ‘indigenous policy’ to Australia and the way in which it could generate ‘goodwill across the community, from the cities and the regions’ and ‘across the political spectrum’. However he also wondered ‘why has this goodwill not translated into reform?’ (Pearson 2006). Four months later, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the famous 1967 Aborigines constitutional alteration referendum, Pearson answered his own question by suggesting that, in Indigenous affairs, Australia is ‘still divided into two ideological tribes’:

One tribe comprising most indigenous leaders and possibly most indigenous people (but by no means an overwhelming majority) and their progressive supporters holds the view that the absence or insufficient realization of rights is the core of the indigenous predicament in this country.

The other tribe comprises most non-progressive, non-indigenous Australians and their conservative political leaders (including substantial numbers in the Labor Party) who hold the view that it is the absence of responsibilities that lies at the core of our people’s malaise ( Pearson 2007a).

Pearson sees these two ideological tribes as ‘insistent and deafly opposed camps’, which helps explain why Indigenous policy debate is ‘still at such a juvenile stage’ in Australia. He sees the rights-oriented progressives, or the liberal left, as having generally dominated debate in Australian Indigenous affairs over the years since the 1967 referendum and the more responsibility-

oriented conservatives as having risen to prominence in more recent times. Pearson himself has been a major critic of the liberal left over the last eight years and clearly supports the rise of an approach focused more on behavioural responsibilities (Pearson 2007b). But he is also critical of the conservatives for their denial of Indigenous-specific rights and sees himself as trying to enunciate a more sophisticated 'radical centre' in Australian Indigenous affairs which advocates 'a synthesis of the rights and responsibilities paradigms' (Pearson 2007a).

This analysis, while very general and schematic, is, I think, quite helpful. It suggests that there has been a *generational swing* in Australian Indigenous affairs policy debates in recent years back from the dominance of the liberal left towards some greater influence for the once-dominant, directive or protective right. It also suggests how this is a very emotive, tribal and ideological swing, which individuals like Pearson have great trouble transcending.

While this generational left-right swing analysis is helpful, I think that there is another generational dynamic here as well. In the introduction to a recent book on developments and debates in Australian Indigenous studies, Cowlshaw, Kowal and Lea wondered whether they might have discerned a 30 year cycle in Australian Indigenous affairs, from 1910 to 1940 then 1970 and 2000. Having identified this idea, however, these authors then discarded it as obviating 'responsibility to analyse the history that has brought us to this point' in the early 2000s (Cowlshaw, Kowal and Lea 2006: 1). While historical details do need to be understood, it does seem to me that the idea of a rough 30 year, or generational, cycle in Australian Indigenous affairs does have some credibility. I think that this *generational cycle* can be related to another dimension of Indigenous affairs, not thus far discussed, and that is its deeply cross-cultural nature.

Indigenous affairs is about developing relationships between a large-scale industrial society and a number of much smaller-scale, rapidly changing hunter-gatherer societies. While all these societies, or cultures, are clearly changing, and to some extent possibly even merging through interaction, there is still a very clear sense in which Indigenous affairs is deeply cross-cultural. There are still today modern hunter-gatherers whose life practices are very substantially different, and to some extent autonomous, from those of the encapsulating industrial society, particularly in remote areas of Australia (Altman 1987, Tonkinson 2007). Because of

this cross-cultural dimension, settler government programs to ameliorate the circumstances and opportunities of Indigenous people seldom, if ever, work as intended. Things happen, through these government programs interacting with Indigenous agency, and through which Indigenous people may hopefully derive some benefit. But the results of government intervention are always a long way from program design (see Folds 2001). There is, in short, an iron law of cross-cultural unintended consequences in Indigenous affairs.

One further consequence of this cross-cultural dimension is that it is very easy for participants in Indigenous affairs to begin to lose faith in what they are doing through government programs. Indeed I would argue that the cross-cultural nature of Indigenous affairs combines with its highly morally-charged nature to produce a particular, characteristic policy dynamic; in which periods of pursuing a particular philosophical and organizational approach to Indigenous issues with some confidence and conviction alternate with periods of greater policy questioning and self-doubt. What Cowlshaw, Kowal and Lea were identifying in their dating of the rough 30 year cycles of Australian Indigenous affairs were these recurring periods of rising self-doubt, the current one of which they correctly dated to the year 2000.

In the year 2000, Noel Pearson published *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, his critique of the way in which Aboriginal people had gained access to social security incomes in the previous 30 years in remote areas of Australia like Cape York, and the way in which when combined with access to alcohol this was rendering the communities of Cape York 'severely dysfunctional' and 'clearly unsuccessful' (Pearson 2000: 15). In September 2000, a senior academic anthropologist, Professor Peter Sutton, delivered the Inaugural Berndt Foundation Lecture at the University of Western Australian which was subsequently revised and published under the title 'The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia Since the Seventies'. In the opening paragraph of that paper, Sutton argued that there were not 'enough signs of improvement' in Indigenous circumstances to 'allow for any further complacency about the correctness of existing approaches' (Sutton 2001: 125). His second paragraph continued as follows:

The contrast between progressivist public rhetoric about empowerment and self-determination on the one hand, and the raw evidence of a disastrous failure in major aspects of Australian Aboriginal affairs policy since the early 1970s, is now

frightening. Policy revision must now go back to bedrock questions, with all bets off, if it is to respond meaningfully to this crisis (Sutton 2001: 125)

This style of argument marked a turning point in Indigenous affairs policy, the beginnings of a period of collective self-doubt. In the previous twenty years, when things were not working as well as expected in Indigenous affairs, the predominant form of analysis would be to suggest that the existing policy approach, variously labeled self-determination or self-management, was not being well implemented. The predominant proposed remedy would be for participants in Indigenous affairs to try harder genuinely to implement the existing policy philosophy through existing, or partly reformed, policy institutions. Now however, another form of analysis was beginning to take hold in the public rhetoric of Australian Indigenous affairs; the failure, crisis and fundamental change form of analysis.

After Pearson and Sutton had given this other form of analysis some public prominence, others began to join in. In March 2002, the Northern Territory's first Indigenous Minister within the new Martin Labor government, John Ah Kit, declared in a ministerial speech that:

Aboriginal Territorians are facing a stark crisis. To say anything else would be to lie – and I believe that now is the time for the truth to be told.

We cannot – indeed must not – continue to guild the lily about what is happening on our communities...

The simple fact is that it is almost impossible to find a functional Aboriginal community anywhere in the Northern Territory (Ah Kit 2002:2)

With such analyses coming from both prominent Indigenous leaders and respected academics, it was not long, as we have seen above, before the Howard Government also joined in. From there, it was but a series of repeated rhetorical steps to the events of June-August 2007, which can I think rightly be seen as the climax of a *generational revolution* in Australian Indigenous affairs. Along the way, during the term of the fourth Howard government, the institutional innovations and policy ideas of the previous generation of participants in this difficult cross-cultural and highly morally-charged area of Australian public policy were summarily dismissed and discarded, in the name of failure, and a new institutional architecture and policy rhetoric for the next generation's efforts in Indigenous affairs began to be built.

The final contention of this essay is that there was a similar generational revolution in Australian Indigenous affairs which ran from the mid 1960s to 1976, drawing on the same basic moral and cross-cultural dynamics though involving an opposite ideological swing from right to left. In this previous period of rising collective self-doubt, the existing objects of negative assessment that were said to have ‘failed’ were a policy of ‘assimilation’ and established State and Territory native welfare organisations which restrictively managed Aboriginal people on areas of land known as reserves. In the 1960s this restrictive management was increasingly seen as unjust and untenable, as having failed. Restrictions on Aboriginal people, like limited access to alcohol and social security payments, began to be changed and lifted. The entry of the Commonwealth into Indigenous affairs on a national scale, rather than just in the Territories, was seen as one of the primary ways in which Indigenous affairs might be very significantly, even fundamentally reformed in this earlier generational revolution. Hence, the importance to that generational revolution of the 1967 referendum, in which the Commonwealth extended its powers to legislate in regard to ‘the aboriginal race in any State’. Thereafter, the Commonwealth could encourage and cajole significant reform in the States knowing that it had a clear new legislative power.

In the Northern Territory, this previous emerging revolution took the form of a battle between the new Canberra-based, Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs and the old Darwin-based Welfare Branch within the Northern Territory Administration of the Department of Territories. It was the new Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and also Social Security, WC Wentworth, who in 1968 directed that there be a move away from the predominant existing practice of paying a large portion of the social security entitlements of Aboriginal people in remote areas to third parties on their behalf and towards direct payment to entitled individuals. The Welfare Branch resisted this move, but was disparaged by the new players as a self-serving, morally-complacent established interest. As a consequence of such resistance, the Welfare Branch was abolished in 1972 and incorporated into the new Canberra-based Department of Aboriginal Affairs which grew out of the previous Office.

I have written this brief account of the late 1960s and early 1970s in a way which is clearly meant to suggest some cyclical parallels with recent years, as well as an opposing ideological swing. If you doubt this cyclical parallel, I suggest you read Paul Hasluck’s *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal*

*Affairs, 1925-1965*. Hasluck had been involved in Indigenous affairs as a journalist and historian in Western Australia since the 1930s and then later far more deeply involved in the Northern Territory as Minister for Territories within the Commonwealth from 1951 to 1963. From 1966 onwards, however, as his book reveals, Hasluck clearly felt very displaced and disparaged in a new Indigenous affairs policy environment. Hasluck's penultimate chapter in that book was entitled 'Ring in the New: Pull the Plug on the Old' (Hasluck 1988).

While the previous generational revolution in Australian Indigenous affairs began to develop during the latter half of the 1960s, it came to its conclusion under the Whitlam and Fraser Commonwealth Governments in the 1970s. I date its conclusion to 1976, the year that the Fraser Government passed two pieces of legislation which had been developed during the Whitlam years – the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976*. Though this legislation was not passed through the Commonwealth Parliament in quite such a dramatic fashion as the five Bills of August 2007, there was still a very clear sense in 1976 of a legislative climax that had been building for some years, and which in the process was rejecting the ideas and legislation of the previous generation in Indigenous affairs. By 1976, the institutions and ideas of the Hasluck generation in Australian Indigenous affairs had been declared a failure and extensively changed, even if, as in the present generational revolution, there were traces of institutional practice which carried through.

I would thus contend that there have been two generational revolutions in Australian Indigenous affairs within the last forty years, both of which, in the name of failure, have similarly disparaged and discarded the work of a previous generation of participants in Indigenous affairs, even as they have also moved in opposite ideological directions. If this analysis is accepted, it should invite considerably more critical thinking about the nature of change in Australian Indigenous affairs under the fourth Howard Government. More fundamentally it could also invite the question, are generational revolutions as good as it gets in Indigenous affairs policy making? Or, can governments, by being aware of the moral and cross-cultural dimensions of Indigenous affairs and the way in which they tend to produce generational revolutions, possibly move beyond such revolutions?

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<sup>1</sup> The legislation to abolish ATSIC was referred to a Select Committee of the Senate in June 2004 which did not report until March 2005 (Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs 2005). This did not, however, stop the third Howard Government from immediately removing the vast bulk of ATSIC’s funding and pushing ahead administratively with its proposed changes to Indigenous affairs arrangements from 1 July 2004 (see Gray and Sanders 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Rowse 2006: 168 notes that Senator Ellison used the terminology of a ‘quiet revolution’ to describe changes in Indigenous affairs in debates in the Commonwealth Parliament in December 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See also Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination 2005.